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September 2013



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The Value of Old and New  
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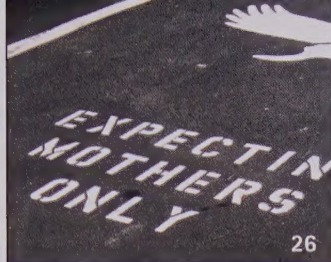


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## PROMISES, PROMISES

VOLUME 26 NUMBER 7 SEPTEMBER 2013

We make promises. God makes promises. We can be confident in the promises of God for God's promises are sure.

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VOICES

## The Company You Keep

by Kate Sprutta Elliott

**A friend of mine said,** “There are people you come home *from*, and there are people you come home *to*.” The people you come home *to* are the ones I consider good company. You know the ones—in their presence you relax. You can be yourself with them. Spending time with those people leaves you feeling renewed—especially after being with the people you come home from.

In the new Bible study that begins this month we will meet women who might be good company for our faith journey. “In Good Company: Stories of Biblical Women” was written by Kay Ward, a Moravian bishop. In this session we learn about Hannah, a promise keeper. Kay writes that “Hannah is a woman of faith and her song begins as a song of praise. . . . And the song ends with the assurance that God is good and that God will continue to guard the feet of the faithful.”

Hannah anguished over her lack of a child. In “Hannah’s Hope, Our Hope,” Joy McDonald Coltvét shares a similar story. She writes, “In our own day, many people long for God’s gift of children, longings that remain unfulfilled. How do we understand God and blessing in this experience? How do faith communities walk together, open to this sorrow? And how do they find joy and resiliency together in the meantime?” These are hard questions. But Joy reminds us “.... even from the cross, Jesus uniquely created family. Jesus gave his mother and the disciple that he loved to one another. He showed them they were family.

That’s a great gift of the church—we are never abandoned.”

Another part of Hannah’s story was her promise to present her child in service to God. How difficult! She barely got him before she had to give him up. But Hannah kept her promise.

One challenge to having children is learning how to let them go. In “Mother as Steward,” Catherine Malotky writes about her changing relationship with her adult daughters. “Now I am blessed by a broader vision of their lives. I can see them interacting with others who mean a great deal to them, others who will be with them when I am gone. Those smiles, those words, those steps are propelling them into a life I am privileged to watch and admire. Were I to hang on tight, I could not see this—nor feel any assurance that they will go on quite well without me when that day comes.”

In this Bible study session, we also explore a passage in Luke in which Jesus talks about new wine in old wine skins. Liv Larson Andrews reflects on this parable in “The Value of Old and New.” She writes, “Whether old or new, wrinkled or smooth, the good news of Jesus Christ is contained in our skin. It has been traced on our brows and written on us from head to toe in the waters of baptism.... may it be poured out of us as refreshing drink for the life of the world.”

May you be in good company as we study the rich stories of Scripture. 🌿  
**Kate Sprutta Elliott** is editor of *Gather*.





GIVE US THIS DAY

## Breaker of Promises

by Megan Jones

The older I get, the fewer promises I make. I don't know if that is good or bad—or simply just true. Promises are serious business. To keep a promise to a friend or a family member, a co-worker or a boss is a sign of loyalty and care, respect and responsibility. It's a big deal.

A broken promise comes at a price: mutual disappointment, guilt, mistrust, hurt feelings, broken relationships. I know because I've been on both sides of that brokenness. Even more complicated is that the words "I promise you" are often implied, if never spoken, in a relationship. We have expectations of one another that are not always explicit. Most of us expect honesty and fidelity in our closest relationships. Most of us understand the same is expected of us.

I am someone who struggles with depression. I share this because it is part of my journey and because I know it is a part of many of yours. It has been helpful to think of depression as something that exists outside of myself. I am not my depression. Depression is a liar, and in some very painful ways it made me a breaker of promises.

It has been my experience that depression's only goal is to stick around at any cost. Depression will do anything to self-perpetuate. It whispers in my ear incessantly and says things to me that I would never say to another. It works at destroying anything real and true about who I am and whose I am.

Depression tells me that, not only am I not loved, I am inherently unlovable. It

says that I am not worthy of love. It gnaws away at my sense of self and promises me that it will never get better. Depression lies and says, "You don't deserve any better. You are weak and broken. Happiness is for other people—people who are strong enough and good enough."

In my lowest moments, I have been paralyzed by those untruths. I broke promises to the people I worked with and walked away from a call. I stopped seeing and talking to friends and family. I quit going to church. Depression worked day and night to keep me isolated, to keep me firmly in its grip. It made me a breaker of promises to others, myself, and to God.

Let's be honest. I was already—and am still sometimes—a breaker of promises to others, myself, and to God. It was depression's ability to make me believe that all of them were breakers of their promises to me that was so devastating and so manipulative—and so untrue.

In the midst of my self-loathing my friends held steady, my family stayed put, and God's loving pursuit of me never ceased. As I began to do the work of recovery (and it is work!) I was reconnected with the person that God is creating me to be. Patiently, persistently, and passionately, God is the one who whispers in my ear, "You are beloved, my child. You are my own, and I am with you." 🌿

**The Rev. Megan Jones** is an ELCA pastor on leave from call. She lives in Chicago, is a voracious reader, and a lover of team trivia. She cares for three English Springer Spaniels.





## ***Always with You***

— by Susan Greeley —

“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”  
(Romans 8:38–39).

**At** the risk of getting off on the wrong foot with *Gather* readers, I’m going to admit something I’ve never said publicly: I don’t like the poem “Footprints in the Sand.”

I’m sure you’re familiar with this favorite of greeting cards and inspirational posters. The author is

looking back over her life and knows that God walked with her because she saw two sets of footprints in the sand. But she’s confused and angry because during the hardest times of her life there was only one set of footprints. She assumes those were the times that God abandoned her, but God quietly corrects her saying,



Those were the times I carried you.” I don’t begrudge the people who find great comfort and encouragement in this poem, but I am not one of them. I have always assumed that the poem was simply too sentimental and schmaltzy for my taste. Now I’m rethinking that.

## WHO MOVED?

Perhaps you’ve seen this question on a church billboard sign: If you don’t feel as close to God as you used to, who moved?

Many people are inclined to think that God is the one who moved. Like the author of the poem, they feel abandoned and deserted in their time of need. Have you ever felt like that?

Or maybe you blame yourself for God’s distance: “I am such a sinful person that no righteous God could hang out with me.”

I don’t belong in that camp. I have been steeped so deeply in the Lutheran understanding of God’s grace that I am confident God is *not* the one who moved. God’s love and forgiveness are omnipresent, unchanging, and eternal.

No, if someone has moved, it’s me. And I think that’s at the root of my discomfort with “Footprints in the Sand.” As I look back on my own life, I’m pretty sure that, in my case, the set of single footprints does not belong to God. They do not represent a time when God carried me. They are my own footprints, moving away from God.

It calls to mind Jesus’ lament in Matthew: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (Matthew 23:37) The translation I grew up with is even harsher: “... and you would not!”

But why? Why would anyone want to move away from God? According to Genesis, all humankind was created in God’s image. Adam’s first relationship was

with God, the creator. Why would a person move away from the source of his very being? Why do we resist the comfort and shelter of Christ’s protection?

## FALLING OUT OF RELATIONSHIP

One reference we have for understanding our relationship with God is our relationships with other people. So maybe we distance ourselves from God for the very same reasons that we fall out of relationship with others. Consider these possibilities:

**We’re angry.** This is the first emotion that comes to mind when I think about falling out of relationship with someone. Often our anger with another person can be overcome by a plea for forgiveness or by the simple passage of time (forget-ness?). But what if we’re angry with God? It’s hard to know how to express that kind of anger, let alone how to heal the relationship. Sometimes we just walk away in frustration.

**We’re afraid.** For anyone who grew up with religious images of fire and brimstone, God is the angry one in the relationship. Fear is a reasonable emotion in the face of a wrathful God, and no healthy person wants to remain in the company of a person (or God) whom they fear. Moving away from the source of fear seems to make good sense.

**We’re jealous.** This was Eve’s downfall in the Garden of Eden. The serpent tempted Eve by saying, “You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:4–5). For Eve, it wasn’t enough to be a created being. She was jealous of God’s knowledge; she wanted to be on an equal footing with God. “So when the woman saw... that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate” (Genesis 3:6).



**We're ashamed.** When the serpent told Eve that "your eyes will be opened" he was telling the truth—just not the whole truth. Now that Adam and Eve knew they were naked, they were ashamed and hid from God. Isn't that what we do when we don't want others to "see us naked?" When we're ashamed of our actions, we often move away from those who are closest to us, hoping to protect our secrets.

**We're proud.** This is the reason that resonates most personally for me. I have been known to act like a defiant child, stomping my foot and declaring, "I can do this by myself!" In this mood I have no interest in being picked up and carried by anyone, not even God. Stubborn and headstrong, I run ahead of God, leaving only my own footprints in the sand.

**We're busy.** This is the kind of moving away that results from distraction, not estrangement. Maybe we reach a milestone in life—marriage or parenthood—and other relationships require more of our time. Maybe we no longer share things in common with the other person. Maybe we think that spending our Sunday mornings with God or in daily devotion is asking for too much time out of our hectic schedules.

**We're lazy.** Let's face it: relationships take work. It requires effort to maintain ties with family members and friends who live across the state or across the country. One has to be intentional about staying current with the lives of young people who are growing up quickly. If we are not willing to put in the time and effort to maintain relationships with people whom we can see, how do we expect to maintain a relationship with God, whom we cannot see?

## OPEN ARMS

So if these are some of the reasons we move away from God, what are God's reasons for moving away from

us? Just another example of why Christians have "good news" to share—God *doesn't* move away from us!

In Genesis, God deliberately goes looking for Adam and Eve, even after they have sinned. Time and again in the Old Testament God renews a covenant with the people of Israel, constantly seeking harmony and relationship. Finally God makes the ultimate gesture of reconciliation by sending Christ into the world to redeem humankind.

Scripture assures us that no matter how far we may stray from God, no matter where we go, we will always find God there:

"Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there" (Psalm 139:7-8).

As for Christ, like the mother hen he stands willing to shelter us if we will only consent. But as theologian and author Barbara Brown Taylor writes, first we must be willing:

"If you have ever loved someone you could not protect, then you understand the depth of Jesus' lament. All you can do is open your arms. You cannot make anyone walk into them. Meanwhile, this is the most vulnerable posture in the world—wings spread, breast exposed—but if you mean what you say, then this is how you stand." ("As a Hen Gathers Her Brood," *Christian Century*, Feb. 25, 1986)

In some sense it doesn't matter whose single set of footprints lies in the sand, God's or mine. If they are God's, then I have surrendered to the love of the Almighty and consented to be carried. If they are mine, even then I am not really alone.

"And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19b). 🌿

Susan Greeley is director of development for Lutheran Social Services of Illinois. She is a member of Good Shepherd in Oak Park, Ill.



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## FAMILY MATTERS

# Breast Awareness Month

by Sue Gamelin

## "It's Breast Awareness

Month," the pastor reminded the group that gathered last October for weekly *pericope* study, his voice heavy with the seriousness of his announcement. The group surprised him by bursting into laughter. Finally one person stopped laughing long enough to ask, "Don't you mean Breast Cancer Awareness Month?" That mistake is almost as good as the one made years ago in the bulletin for our children's Christmas program. The song we were all to sing was, "The Friendly Breasts."

I was telling my friend Rosa, a breast cancer survivor, about "Breast Awareness Month." But as I was giggling, Rosa, a teacher, said, "That title is more accurate than you'd think. The breast cancer awareness emphasis next month in October reminds us that we need to be aware of our breasts, checking them for abnormalities and getting mammograms when it's appropriate to do so. Every month is Breast Awareness Month because we're called to practice good health." Rosa was right.

Rosa's cancer was so small that it took a mammogram to detect it. A wire was threaded into her breast before the lumpectomy, so that the surgeon could find and remove the cancer cells. When we talked, the skin under her arm was still raw from the radiation that followed surgery. As she rubs lotion on that skin each day, she wonders if she'll feel another lump. Her fear isn't rational, but it is real. Rosa confesses, "I haven't learned to turn off the voices in my head, even

when they are foolish." Patsy's breast cancer is more than five years behind her. She and husband, Ben, celebrated No. More. Cancer. Patsy, a nurse, adds, "Yet. When a mammogram revealed the tiny lump that turned out to be a stage 1 malignancy, Patsy read everything she could find about breast cancer. Diagnoses, treatment options, statistics about survival, etc. She had a genetics test to see if she had inherited the harmful BRCA1 or BRCA2 mutation. Thankfully, the test was negative."

Patsy knows that her decisions to have radiation and chemotherapy after her lumpectomy, and to take tamoxifen for the five years following, decrease the chances of the cancer returning. But she also knows that there is no such thing as a guarantee. Now she's trying to decide if she'll take a new drug that seems to help prevent recurrence of the cancer. The side effect warnings are making Patsy pause. What does husband, Ben, think? He has been with Patsy through every step of her breast cancer. He's read everything she suggested, and went with her to every appointment, every procedure, every surgery. Ben is a plain-spoken guy. "Patsy did everything right. She made good decisions. Her surgeon and oncologist are excellent. I'm convinced that she has no more cancer." Patsy silently adds "yet" and she lovingly smiles at Ben.

Ben is a terrific supporter. So is Rosa's friend from church, Marguerite. Every day Marguerite took Rosa to her short, but intense course of radiation therapy, then fixed simple meals for her



after driving her home. Rosa says she's made it through her surgery and radiation because of supporters like Marguerite, together with the prayer support of people near and far. Because of them, she knows she'll get through the chemo that lies ahead.

Breast cancer is a family matter. It's a nuclear family, extended family, and church family matter. It affects not just the patient, but also everyone who loves her. Patsy laughs ruefully when she remembers the reaction of Bill, her 93-year-old dad, when she sat in his bedroom in her home and told him about her diagnosis. "What will happen to me?" Bill cried out. Patsy's daughter, Cindy, who lives next door, chimed in, "Hey, what about *me*?" Patsy knew that Cindy has what it takes to go on with life, no matter what would happen. And she knew that Cindy and husband, Ben, would be there for father, Bill. When the two men joked about the possibility that Ben would kick Bill out, wheelchair and all, a good laugh broke the tension on that poignant day.

Laughter can help. But laughter can't cover up the anxiety, confusion, and downright fear that swirl around the 226,870 women and men who were diagnosed with breast cancer in 2012. Those somber emotions are also there, in differing ways, among the people who love those 226,870.

With a diagnosis of breast cancer, there is loss. Our breasts are a precious part of intimacy with those we love. Many of us watched our breasts grow in pregnancy, then become engorged with milk for tiny, ravenous mouths. With breast cancer, this part of our identity is endangered. Should mastectomy be chosen, loss haunts us in our mirrors. Above all, we wonder about the years left to us. In the midst of these losses, our grieving, and the grieving of those who love us, may lead to denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance, visiting us in random order and often making a return trip.

Where cancer is concerned, denial can be an enemy or a friend. A woman I met in the 70s had settled into denial for so long that the lump in her breast became egg-sized. On the other hand, my 93-year-old mother, who adjusts the prosthesis in her bra every morning, has been heard to proclaim, "Isn't it wonderful that I've never had cancer!"

Where is God in all this? In 1976 I was among those to whom the Rev. Carter Heyward told the story of the pain and turmoil of her "irregular ordination" in the Episcopal church in 1974, during the time when that church did not ordain women. I was deeply moved by her conviction that God insists on being right where the pain is

deepest. Does God inflict wounds? Does God test us? Does God bring death because God "needs your wife more than you do?" The god described in these ways is not the God who spoke to us in Jesus' words and actions, the God who is love. Our God digs deeply into the wounds gouged into our lives by disease and disaster, hate and abuse, injustice and violence, healing from the inside out.



My friend Al told me that he continues to be comforted by something his wife said again and again before her death following a 10-year battle with breast cancer. "I'm turning all this over to God," she would say, "and I'm not going to take it back."

Amen. 🌸

**The Rev. Sue Gamelin** is a retired ELCA pastor in North Carolina. She and her husband, Don, have four grown children and their spouses and 10 grandchildren.





# THE VALUE OF OLD AND NEW

*by Liv Larson Andrews*

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Then they said to him, "John's disciples, like the disciples of the Pharisees, frequently fast and pray, but your disciples eat and drink." Jesus said to them, "You cannot make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them, can you? The days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days." He also told them a parable: "No one tears a piece from a new garment and sews it on an old garment; otherwise the new will be torn, and the piece from the new will not match the old. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. And no one after drinking old wine desires new wine, but says, 'The old is good.'"

—Luke 5:33–39

**W**e are anxious about aging. Flip through any women's magazine and you'll find glossy promises of age prevention. Miracle serums offer "healing" of skin that is old and grooved, erasing the dreaded signs of age. New, young-looking skin is the goal of these products. Immense profit is the goal of the product-makers. The more we feel ashamed of our age and its signs on our bodies, the more we buy expensive "miracle" products.

What a different message we find when we flip through the pages of our holy book. In Luke 5, a conversation about age and skin comes up in a parable. Jesus is questioned on the behavior of his disciples.

They don't act like other disciples who continually fast and pray. Jesus responds with talk about a wedding feast, new and old clothes, and new and old wine. Jesus ends his teaching with the line, "The old is good."

Old is *good*.

Like most of the parables of Jesus, this illustration about wedding guests, wineskins, and fabric can be tricky. It seems from a quick read-through that new matters most. Don't ruin a new garment by cutting out a piece of it to sew onto an old garment. And don't put new wine into old skins because the wine will be lost when the old skins burst. Losing all that wine and putting a hole in a new blouse would be a waste.



On a closer read, we notice that Jesus also mentions the destruction of the old wineskins as a regrettable loss: “the wine will be spilled and the skins destroyed.” Those old skins would have been flavored with tannins from all the other vintages they had held over the years. Like a seasoned cast-iron skillet that increases flavor with use, old wineskins are valuable. You can’t store the well-aged wine anywhere else.

The problem Jesus addresses in this parable is not age, but use. Or fit. Improper use of the wineskins means *both* the new wine and the old skins are wasted. What Jesus’ critics think is right behavior for his disciples—fasting and praying—would be a waste of precious hours that Jesus spends with them. Fasting doesn’t fit with the joyous presence of Messiah. Time will come for fasting, Jesus says. But for now the bridegroom, the Messiah, is here. Fasting at a wedding, like old cloth sewn to new, just doesn’t match the occasion.

### **A light to all**

Anxiety about age doesn’t match with the gospel of Jesus, but it can sneak in and influence our faith nonetheless. We have a hard time remembering the closing statement of the wineskins parable, “The old is good.” At coffee hour, in church meetings, when we consider hiring ministers, we seem to always want the new. “Where are our young people?” we frantically ask. On one hand, concern for all ages of people who are missing from our fellowship is right and good. It fits with being a disciple. What doesn’t fit is fear and ageism, the idea that only the youthful are important.

Sometimes we worry that if we don’t “bring in the young people,” our church will die. And like the ironic image of wedding guests choosing to fast, our fretting over the age of church members is the same as pouring new wine into old wineskins. We lose both the new and old. We pursue programs or strategies to attract the young while failing to understand the value and worth of our mature members.

Worrying about whether our church will die leads us to forget that the call to follow Christ is first and foremost a call to die.

Hymn writer Marty Haugen describes the community of faith like this: “We are the young, our lives are a mystery, we are the old who yearn for your face; We have been sung throughout all of history, called to be light to the whole human race” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 532).

When we live in fear, fear of age or death or anything else, we miss our calling. This hymn joyfully names the unique life settings of both the young and the old. We need not fear. Some of us are young and full of questions, like a new garment not yet tried and stretched. Others of us are old and seasoned, yearning to see the face of our creator. All of us are called to be light to the whole human race.

### **A community for all**

I am a pastor in a small congregation. Though we are a mostly older group, we are changing. Younger faces are beginning to pop up, and the youngest face of all is that of my 3-year-old son. As a leader, I am often asked “What does your church have for kids?” In the past, I have fumbled my answers: “Well, we hope to get our Sunday school up and running again. Maybe we will send a group to camp this summer.” Those answers feel like wine bursting out and falling on the ground. Splat. Recently, I was reminded by my young son what it means to be a light to the human race, and how it might change the way I answer the question about kids and church.

An older man in the congregation had died. Little did I know that in life he took great delight in my son, often playing peek-a-boo over the back of the pew during Sunday worship. (So much remains a mystery to mothers who are pastors!) The Sunday after this man’s death, his sister, deeply grieving, was worshipping with us as usual. My son was in his usual spot. In a moment of playfulness, he put on my husband’s sunglasses and peeked over his shoulder. The grieving sister saw him, laughed out loud, and gave thanks to God. She thought about her brother and the joy he would have taken in such a goofy moment. The communion of the saints became real to her in that instant.



After hearing about this grieving sister's experience, I am now inspired to tell those who ask about *what we have* for kids: "Well, we don't offer any special programs. But we do have a whole lot of old people who will love your children and take delight in all the silly things they do. If that sounds like a community you want to take part in, come!" After all, well-aged wine tastes good.

### A feast for all

Speaking of well-aged wine, there was probably a skin or two of it on the table of Levi, the tax collector. In Luke 5:27-32 we read that before Jesus got around to telling stories about new things and old things, he sat down to supper at Levi's house. That's where all this trouble began.

Or, you could say the trouble began back in chapter four of Luke, when he read the scroll of Isaiah about bringing sight to the blind and freedom to the captives, letting all the oppressed go free. He scandalized the synagogue that day by claiming to be the fulfillment of that Old Testament promise.

Or maybe Jesus' trouble began a few more chapters back at the announcement of his birth and the song from his mother's lips, praising God: "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." Some folks might not take kindly to that.

We might go back even further, to the Hebrew scriptures and the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah's visions ring powerfully through the narrative of Luke's gospel.

The scene from Isaiah 25 about God's holy mountain may be where the trouble begins for God's chosen servant: "For you have been a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat... On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear."

A feast for *all* people, even our enemies?

### Grace for all creation

Liturgical scholar Gordon Lathrop teaches that the heart of Christianity is meal fellowship. We tell the world who we are through our table practices and table company. Eating and drinking with others is to share their lot in life, to fully welcome them and to be associated with them. By eating and drinking with those outside the temple's standards of purity, Jesus places himself outside the temple's standards of purity as well.

It was participating in a feast like this one described in Isaiah 25 that brought Jesus under the Pharisees criticism in Luke 5. His telling the parable of the wineskins is his response. God's grace, offered freely to all creation, doesn't match with the idea that some people are more holy than others. When we attempt to categorize others—letting some in while keeping others out—we end up losing sight of God's grace and destroying our most needful neighbors. Both the old (the riches of God's grace) and the new (the life of the neighbor) are wasted.

Whether old or new, wrinkled or smooth, the good news of Jesus Christ is contained in our skin. It has been traced on our brows and written on us from head to toe in the waters of baptism. Perhaps it will burst out of us, leaving our bodies riven and our hearts perplexed. No, may it instead be poured out of us as refreshing drink for the life of the world. Either way, the intent of the good news is to get out, to be shared.

Let the practices of our daily lives be always open to the possibilities that the risen Christ has for us. Let our church communities be freshened by the presence of new wine, clear and striking like the playful voices of children. Let our churches also offer up the well-aged wine, treasures worthy of sharing. Finally, let us put aside all fear and anxiety. With our skin radiant from the oil of the gospel and the knowledge that we are God's children, fear just doesn't match the new garment of our resurrected lives. ☞

The Rev. Liv Larson Andrews lives with her spouse and young son in Spokane, Wash. She is the pastor of Salem Lutheran Church in the West Central neighborhood and enjoys hosting friends and strangers at the table





EARTH WISE

## Green Spirituality

by Catherine Pate

As I write this in April, I am sitting in my office 500 miles north of Minneapolis, Minn. We have just experienced a spring storm that dumped more than four inches of heavy snow on our already-winter-weary prairie city. It seems particularly poignant then to be thinking about why green spaces are essential for the spiritual health of our communities.

In a recent study conducted by the University of Edinburgh and Haringey University (both in Edinburgh, Scotland), scientists discovered that exposure to natural green spaces can have a meditative effect on brain activity.

“Going for a walk in a green space or just sitting, or even viewing green spaces from your office window is likely to have a restorative effect and help with attention fatigue and stress recovery,” said Jenny Roe, lecturer at Haringey University and author of the study, “The restorative benefits of walking in urban and rural settings in adults with good and poor mental health” (*Health and Place*, 2011).

The study demonstrates that this green-space effect is not seen when we walk through urban areas with heavy traffic or even historic neighborhoods. It is unique to green spaces.

Here in Manitoba, we are getting a little cranky after six long months of deep winter. A few weeks ago, I heard a representative from our local Mood Disorder Association commenting on the radio about the organization’s inability to keep up with the demand for SAD

(Seasonal Affective Disorder) lights, which are used to combat the mood-affecting syndrome.

Most of us intuitively know it is important to our physical and mental health to get outside. There have been countless studies that validate our experience of emotional restoration after visiting a green space. This may explain why 28 million people above the age of six in the United States play golf, according to a 2009 study by the National Golf Foundation.

I’m curious about the effect on our spiritual life when we take time to be among the trees, grass, and bushes that green spaces offer. I wish we could talk as quantitatively about our spiritual health as the scientists do about our mental health.

Time in nature has been proven to reduce the stress-producing hormone cortisol, in our bodies. When our bodies produce less of that stress hormone because we are out in nature, does that naturally make prayer and meditation more possible?

Is this why many of us say, “I feel one with God when I’m out in nature?” Does a walk in the park make prayer more accessible and open us up to communicate more effectively with God? I’ve never understood people who say, “The golf course is my church.” But does this study call my judgment into question? Are those golfers really experiencing something divine?

My father-in-law golfed every Saturday morning of his adult life, preferring



to walk and carry his own clubs. He eventually graduated to pulling a golf trolley, but he finally gave up golf all together when the pressure to speed up the game because motorized carts changed the nature of the experience for him.

In his 2011 book, *Nature as Spiritual Practice*, Steven Chase uses examples of theology, Scripture, history, and culture to argue that nature can positively impact us spiritually and morally. He writes that prayer, meditation, and worship can be done outside and believes in the power of nature to soothe and heal the soul.

Jenny Roe and Steven Chase seem to suggest that we can claim real benefits physically, mentally, and spiritually when we get out and enjoy our green spaces. It may also go a long way in explaining the upsurge in popularity of walking pilgrimages.

Each year thousands of travelers complete long distance walking routes like St. Cuthbert's Way in the North of England and the Camino de Santiago network of ancient pilgrimage routes that stretch across Europe and come together in Spain.

A couple of years ago, three people from our church walked the Camino trail, expecting to

have made significant life decisions by the end of their 500-mile journey. What each of them discovered instead was that they just walked. No great revelations came to them. No great resolutions were made. They just were. And they were at ease with not having figured everything out. They said they gained perspective and more clearly understood the importance of being instead of doing. Is this what happens when our cortisol

levels remain low over long periods of time? Is a sense of contentment and peace the result spending time in nature?

St. Augustine gave us the Latin proverb, "*Solvitur ambulando*," or "It is all solved by walking." Perhaps what he meant was that when we get out of our work space, study space, living space and just walk or sit in the midst of nature, we gain perspective and we learn the importance of being.

How many of our church communities hold special outdoor services? Could doing this improve our spiritual lives? Maybe the Sunday school picnic is more important than we thought. Maybe that Easter sunrise service held in the local park is more than an opportunity for evangelical witness.

By the time you read this summer will almost be over. I hope you have seized every opportunity to picnic in the park and take long walks through the local trails.

As I write, I look out my window at the snow and hope for spring. And as you read, you will soon watch the leaves turn vibrant colors.

What a wonderful time to be outdoors. 🌳

Catherine Pate is an independent marketing manager, editor, and writer living in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada.





# Please, God

by S.K.O.





They told her it was a doughnut machine, but she didn't buy that one. I'd already told my daughter that the machine would take pictures of her brain, so she knew that the nurses' allusions to pastries were just pretend. She hesitated for a moment, though, hoping against hope that they were to be believed. Finally she shook her head no.

She agreed to the green pajamas, though, and let them talk her out of her necklace, and even her pony-



tail holders. We walked together into the MRI room, and beheld the doughnut machine together. It does look like a doughnut—thick and round and white.

They offered her the movie of her choice, to be delivered via special goggles and earphones during the test. She picked one she hadn't seen and happily crawled onto the table—animation to the rescue! When all was prepared, I kissed her, smudged her forehead

with a sign of the cross, and the machine slid her into the doughnut.

The movie began, and the nurse handed me earplugs, and sent me to sit in a white plastic beach chair. I had barely sat down when the banging of the MRI started. Arrhythmic and piercing, the sound could not be ignored.

I looked through the window at the radiologist who was able to see my precious daughter's brain, then back at her sock-clad feet in front of me. I wondered what they could see on those screens. Her passing thoughts? The half-learned math facts that vex her so? A growing tumor?

Not that. Certainly not that. Please, God, not that. My throat tightened, and my pulse quickened. Time to think about something else.

The machine continued its deafening clatter. Her little feet kicked a bit, then slowed. I hoped she wasn't afraid. I hoped the radiologists were looking at pictures of a brain that was perfect in every way. I hoped the clanging would stop.

#### Let the bargaining begin

It'd probably been 20 years since I last heard that cacophonous sound. Back then I was a student chaplain at a large urban hospital. I was young, and trod the hospital halls fortified with just a clipboard and two years of theological study. I had no idea what I was doing, which I suppose was the point. When the pager went off, I would head wherever they sent me and do whatever seemed best. To the dying, I offered halting prayers that never seemed quite right. To the anxious, I offered comfort, and sometimes coffee.

To a frantic mother waiting for the MRI results that could be bad, worse, or devastating, I offered to sit and stay. It's all I could think of, at the time. We



weren't inside the MRI room then, but in the hallway just outside. Our chairs vibrated with the noise. While we waited, she outlined to me the terrifying reason for the test. After a while, she told me, by way of confession, about the complex bargain that she had attempted to strike with God regarding her child's health. I don't remember what I said, and only hope it was useful or comforting. I just remember the banging, the woman's exhausted face, the vibrating molded plastic chairs.

This was not the first time I'd heard patients make deals with God, and it wouldn't be the last. Lovers bargained away time and talents for each other; parents offered pious behavior in exchange for a child's restored health. Grown children promised tithes as remuneration for a parent's recovery. After a while, the negotiations blended together, a jumble sale table of tithes and prayers, rosary beads, and hope.

I didn't really understand. I was young. My life to that point had been rather charmed, honestly. With a few predictable exceptions, everyone I loved was still alive, healthy, and free from trauma. I was privileged. This bargaining thing? I didn't get it. If I'd ever bargained with God, I couldn't remember it.

I can't really say the same anymore.

Now I'm a mom.

More specifically, now I'm the mother of a child with a serious illness.

Bargaining with God is a way of life.

I realize, of course, that it's not really a logical choice. After all, I'm essentially saying, "Hey, thanks for all the gifts and stuff, and now I'll offer them right back to you in exchange for another gift that you may or may not give me because you haven't actually agreed to this negotiation and may or may not have planned this outcome regardless." Ridiculous, I know.

But it doesn't stop me.

I used to judge those people in the hospital, you

know. I used to think that they should just pray for strength, for acceptance, for comfort, and leave the deal-making to the devil. I used to pray for them, asking God to increase their faith.

I don't judge them anymore.

I get it.

### Consummate liar

My daughter was born with HIV. Her birth mother died of the AIDS virus, and with no other family able to care for her, she became available for adoption. I adopted her a few days before she turned three.

I have a background in working with children who live with HIV. I felt that I was uniquely prepared for

this parenting challenge (and that there were other challenges that I was not prepared to manage.) I thought, back then, that I had this virus thing down, that I understood it.

In some ways I did and do understand the virus. Talk to me about T cells and viral loads and CD4 percentages, and I'm right there. Suggest a medication regime, and I know it. I knew 10 ways to get a bitter medication into a child years before I had a child of my own. I'm good at the medical side. I really thought I had it all down pat.

Oh, how I over-estimated myself.

I knew nothing.

I didn't know that this wily virus would turn me into a consummate liar. Someone told me once that disclosing an HIV status is a bell that cannot be unrung. So I have opted not to ring that bell for her, allowing her to make her own choices with the adults and children that inhabit her life. There are exceptions of course. Many of my adult friends and family know and I did fill the school nurse in on the secret.

Each lie, each deception of omission or commission leaves a thick, bitter taste on my tongue. It still doesn't come easily to me.

## **I'm not sure I expect to control God.**



I didn't know the first thing about how those medical realities that I understood would play out in the day-to-day. The medications have their own monotonous tyranny: every day, twice a day, for the rest of her life. My counters are sticky with syrup. My cabinets groan with the weight of dozens of bottles. I can fill the syringes with my eyes closed. 15ccs, 6, 5, 10. She takes them in that order, always; the most bitter comes first, the least is last.

Every doctor visit, every lab brings a new test, a new question to pursue, a new absence from work and school to manage, a new worry. Because a cough is never just a cough until you are sure it's not pneumonia. And every backward slide in memory is never just a slide until you are sure it's not a brain tumor.

So we test. And we worry. And we praise God every day for the amazing health insurance that my employer provides. And then we worry some more.

And so the doctor writes referrals, and I start bargaining. "If this test just comes back clear, God, I'll..." That's where I get stuck, as I don't have that much to offer. When my daughter offers me her allowance in exchange for some privilege she seeks, I have to giggle. I gave her the allowance. I suppose God giggles, too. I'll volunteer more, I offer up, or donate more money. As if my time and my treasure were mine to offer in the first place.

### Full attention

Years ago, I heard a sermon about bargaining with God. The preacher said that we attempt to bargain with God because we're seeking control in circumstances that are out of control. In short, we try to control God.

It makes sense, I guess, but I'm not sure I expect to control God.

My daughter sometimes asks for my help when she doesn't need it. She pretends not to know how to do things that I know full well that she has mastered. I sometimes help her and sometimes do not. Either way,

she has my full attention. I suspect this is what she wants most. I think, she just wants to know that I am still on her side. I wonder if this isn't what I'm doing with God, if I'm not seeking connection more than control, if I'm not seeking presence most of all?

There is a sudden stop to the banging. I look up, and stand as the doctor and two nurses enter the room. They slide my daughter out and stop the movie. They tell her that they are going to put an IV in and that it will pinch but just for a little while.

Behind the movie goggles, she begins to cry. This girl gets IVs and blood draws all the time, but always from the safety of my lap. She begs the doctors to let me come in the doughnut with her. I hold onto her foot and her hand. I whisper to her, and try to calm her down. The staff confer and say that I can hold her feet. I grab hold, and they slide her back in the doughnut for the last part of the test. They leave the room, and for a heartbeat, it's silent.

"Mommy?"

Her tiny voice slides out of the machine and into my heart.

"Yes, Baby?"

"Promise you will never let go?"

"Not forever and ever," I say.

The machine lurches back into business. The banging starts again. I hold tight to her feet, and feel each perfect toe beneath her lacy socks. I think of bargains I make, deals I've kept, and deals I've broken. Her birth mother might have promised forever and ever, too, I think. "Please, God," I think, "just please."

And the noise is a song, is a silence, is a prayer.

I have no chips to put on the table, just a small foot, a relentless hope, and more love than my heart can bear. 🌸

The author, whose name is withheld upon request, is an ordained Teaching Elder (pastor) in the Presbyterian Church USA. She lives in a small city with her six-and-a-half year-old daughter and her cat. Her daughter's MRI results came back clear.





# MOTHER AS STEWARD





I punched in my password. “Mom,” the recording said. “Sorry I missed your calls this weekend. I was really busy, but I’m around evenings this week. Try again. I’d love to talk to you.” She is 1,400 miles away, going to grad school, preparing for the life ahead of her. She is cooking, and studying, and taking care of her cat. *Her* cat, not ours. I do not have a key to her apartment.

A text message flashes on my phone. “Mom. It’s a go on the 11<sup>th</sup>. Let’s do it!” She is 15 miles away, living with her true love, married now almost two years, starting the slow process of making a house a home. She is well into a job she finally landed and loves. She teaches Sunday school and is on the church council. We sometimes watch her dog, and she sometimes watches ours. *Her* dog. *Our* dog. Not the same.

These are the daughters I am privileged to walk with, the daughters whose lives are an unfolding miracle, whose love I do not take for granted after the chill of high school vibes (necessary but tough). Back then, their teachers told me how funny and interesting these same daughters were. I asked them to tell me more since *these* “funny and interesting” daughters did not come home to me. I knew they would someday, and the teachers’ brief stories enabled my patience.

Of course, part of the problem was me. Waves of anxiety would wash over me, worried that they would not know how to do their laundry, or in times of particular vulnerability, a gnawing fear that they would do something in an impulsive moment that would damage their future in some irretrievable way. I could not bear the thought of losing them, or, should they live, of suffering with them for a lifetime.

No wonder, then, that we clashed on occasion. Their job was to grow up, to leave me and my hovering. Their job was to sever the metaphorical umbilical cord that still tied us, to find their own sources of nourishment and their own ways of disposing of the waste that sloughs off life as we make our way through it. The importance of my bloodstream began shrinking at their birth, when the literal umbilical cord that linked us was cut.

#### Learning to release

Our lives as parents are all about letting go. I speak as a mother of daughters, but their father would have his own angle. I watched him grieve and overcompensate in his own way when they were working



their way out of our home and daily embrace. My sisters confirm a similar journey with their sons. I have given witness to my experience with new parents. The first nine months our babies sheltered inside. The next three are as intense but happen outside the womb. These 12 months are all about bonding. Then we spend the rest of our children's lives trying to release them.

So, when I read about Hannah, whose yearning for a child was so deep and desperate, I wonder how she could let go of her first child as soon as he was weaned. How could she release him to the high priest? As she turned him over to Eli, she said, "...I have lent him to the LORD; as long as he lives, he is given to the LORD." She left him there for the LORD" (1 Samuel 1:27-28).

Hannah was extraordinary, to be sure, but contemporary women give up their children, too. What kind of courage does it take for a teen to give up her baby, with hopes that adoption might bring a better life for them both? And what kind of courage does it take to live with this decision for a lifetime?

A friend was the son of missionaries. He grew up at boarding school, away from them much of the year for the sake of his education. This was my father's story in some ways. His father was a pastor in northern Minnesota. One fall, my grandparents drove their 12-year-old son to school in the Twin Cities, miles and miles away from home, so that he could begin the long path to ordination. My grandmother said she looked out the car's back window at that little boy waving as they drove away and wondered, "Now, how will this go?"

A surprising number of us have had to let children go too soon. Death changes hopes and dreams, whether it happens within days of conception, or to children fully grown. We are not supposed to bury our children. Though it is consoling that God welcomes them into an eternity of love, it is not enough, especially at first. This letting go is visceral, primal, physical.

We are the parents of three daughters, one of whom died after a mere eight weeks. The chaplain

in the emergency room asked us whether we had thought of a funeral home that might take her body. Overwhelmed with shock and grief, I responded, "We are not yet done with midwives! How could we have thought of a funeral home?"

### Claiming the waters of baptism

Some of us, like Hannah, are robbed of parenthood even before we've begun. This is a letting go, too. Monthly disappointment. Tests. Interventions. Infertility treatment has made tremendous strides, but, for those who long for children, the threat to this dream and/or its loss shapes so much of the view ahead.

Hannah eventually had her son, and subsequently children, but there are those who never conceive, those who must release even the dream.

The truth of it is, our children, whether more than a hope or not, whether biological or not, were never truly ours alone. We confess this in baptism, when we publically name them children of God. Like Hannah, who consecrated her son to the God who had heard her prayers, we offer ours back to God in baptism. We name the dangers before us all, sloshing water that can so quickly snuff out a life. We also claim that water—which once protected us in the womb—washes us for rebirth to life in Christ's love. We do this in public, but it has been true all along. These children of ours are an expression of God's imagination. We are their stewards.

Perhaps this is the unique burden of being a parent. Our culture and the legacy of our economic system speak of our children as our own. We have financial responsibility. We are expected to nurture their minds and their bodies, to provide a home, safety, and love. We agonize with them when they are new. Feeding enough? Warm enough? Loved enough? It is so clear this child is helpless without us!

Ironically, the rewards we wait for and celebrate—first smile, first word, first steps—are also that child's first departure from us. Those smiles will charm others



in addition to you and someday will win the heart of a life partner. Those words will become a path into the hearts and minds of friends and co-workers, opening a world of independence and self-sufficiency. Those first steps will someday lead to a school bus, and then a graduation, and then a morning commute.

### Remembering to be a steward

We are stewards of our children, as we are stewards of our selves. They are lent to us, as we are to them. Today, I watched a son speak of his father at his funeral. This man, a saint by all rights, is now dead, no longer an aging burden to his children (though they did not think of him in this way). His love and affection is a memory now, rich and lively, but a memory. His children will now learn to live without his presence.

There is a parallel here. If we are stewards of our children's lives, then we must let them go. In fact, that is the whole point. Those days of profound dependency will one day be in memory only, told in stories of socks left scattered, or a late-night rescue when the gas tank was drained. But there will emerge a day when we realize that they are on their own now, and our stewardship is more about encouragement than direction.

When my daughters were preparing to leave for college, I was bereft. I could not imagine life without them in our home. I wept as we drove away from the dorm building of the first daughter to leave. I struggled to breathe evenly when we walked out of the newly settled dorm room of the second. I could not imagine life without them.

Now I can *remember* them being with me daily, but it is right that they are not. Now I am blessed by a broader vision of their lives.


I can see them interacting with others who mean a great deal to them, others who will be with them when I am gone. Those smiles, those words, those steps are propelling them into a life I am privileged to watch and admire. Were I to hang on tight, I could not see this—nor

feel any assurance that they will go on quite well without me when that day comes.

### Walking with them

Even more powerful than my own interests, I can see my daughters interacting with the world, contributing to the common good, flexing their gifts on behalf of others. This is their calling as baptized ones, as it is mine. With wonder, I can ask, "Who has God created here? What gifts? What passions? What hopes?" Perhaps this is some of what Hannah saw in her vision of Samuel's future. Perhaps this made it easier for her to release him to God's service. In her prayer, she imagined the power of God in him, an imagination that would one day also fill Mary, the mother of Jesus (1 Samuel 2:1–10 and Luke 1:46–55).

With all this noble talk of callings and stewarding, I am comforted by a small detail near the end of Hannah's story. Each year, Hannah made Samuel a little robe, and brought it to him when she went up with her husband to Shiloh to offer the yearly sacrifice. He was but a boy wearing a ceremonial linen *ephod*, (garment) in 1 Samuel 2:18–20. Where others saw a priest in the making, Hannah also saw her son. Like Mary, who whispered to Jesus at the wedding in Cana that the wine had run out, Hannah, even at a distance, shared an intimacy with Samuel.

My mother has said that her mothering never ends. I know this now in ways I could not when my daughters were young. I have released them to the world, but they will always be my daughters. A care package here, a late-night phone call there, the night watch when they are sleep deprived with a newborn, a prayer for their protection as I fall asleep. It is my stewardship of these gifts. I am so honored to be their mother, and grateful to God for the privilege of walking with them. 

**The Rev. Catherine Malotky**, an ELCA pastor, serves at Luther Seminary as a philanthropic adviser. She has served as a parish pastor, editor, teacher, and retreat leader.

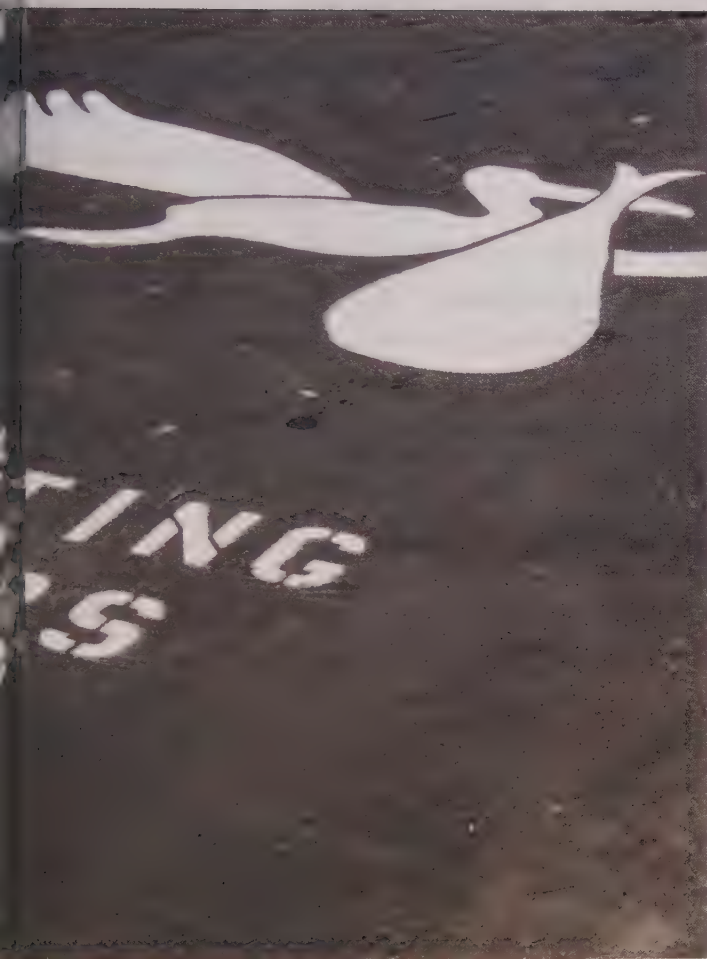


# *Hannah's Hope, Our Hope*



I went to a story-telling event the other night, and I was transfixed by one story. I felt like my breathing was timed with hers as the story unfolded. With beauty and honesty, she told how in her 30s she desperately wanted a child—and how her pregnancies ended in one miscarriage, and then another, and then a third.





by Joy L. McDonald Coltvet

Zoe had to release the idea that she would give birth, she could become a mother to her own child, conceived by love and science and a remarkable turn of events.

In this month's Bible study session we read about Hannah. As you know from the study, Hannah's story ends just like the others—with a birth, with five more births, as a sign of God's favor and faithfulness.

#### Infertility

I always hope the stories will end this way—stories of longing, being fulfilled with a birth—because that's what I want for everyone who wants a child. It's Hannah's story and Tamar's and Naomi's and Sarah's and Elizabeth's. In many biblical stories, we read about women who were barren and then gave birth.

In our own day, many people long for God's gift of children, longings that remain unfulfilled. How do we understand God and blessing in this experience? How do faith communities walk together, open to this sorrow? And how do they find joy and resiliency together in the meantime?

I have never been able to get pregnant. For years people hinted, with winks and nudges, that maybe it was time to start a family. One Mother's Day at a former church, someone shook my hand and said, "Happy Mother's D... oh wait, I guess that doesn't apply to you." Even people very close to us would casually say in passing things like, "Oh, well, you just don't understand because you're not parents." After about seven years of trying, we decided to explore our infertility, and doctors could find no concrete medical reasons why we were not conceiving. It was a mystery.

I just read a gripping novel where the main character, Zoe, lost baby after baby as well, so this woman's story was vivid.

Both of these stories ended as I always hope they will—with a birth. The storyteller's daughter was there. At my table, a listener commented with quiet reverence, "She tells her story, and then we look over and see a little girl who looks just like her." In the novel, Zoe's partner was able to carry their baby—so although



Unlike many couples we know, we did not opt to go very far into hormonal therapies or other fertility procedures. We felt we should use our resources to parent children already born. We have been married 16 years, 13 as a childless couple, and we chose adoption as our route to family. Most of the time, we ride the emotional roller coaster of being an international, multi-racial, adoptive family with a lot of joy. However, I feel a closeness to all those who experience deep questions for God about their experience with infertility.

Why?

I appreciate Hannah's story (and other biblical accounts of infertility) because we are given no reason why some women become pregnant, and others do not. Love, or lack of love, is not a factor.

Though Hannah has spent years unable to bear children, it is clear that her husband, Elkanah, loves her. It is easy to understand—then and now—how the inability to become pregnant and the possible cultural and religious stigmas it holds could come between couples.

But in this biblical story, love is not tied to ability to give birth to children. Infertility is not a curse or punishment.

How to tell our stories of grief?

One part of Hannah's story I find helpful is that she, in her distress, went to the temple and caused a scene. I imagine that amidst her requests, she let God have it—expressing her frustration, crying out her anguish. I believe that God can take it, and that both this story and many others (including the psalms) indicate that we can pray our most honest, heart-felt, not-nice prayers to God.

I experienced this at Bethany Lutheran Church in Chicago, Ill., an African-American congregation I attended when I was in seminary. We always gathered in a large circle around the room for the prayers of the

people. One Sunday, a woman began shouting out her anguish to God in our presence. I felt simultaneously uncomfortable and incredibly thankful to experience this embodiment of prayer.

We can do that together. Hannah shows us the way. She is so upset that Eli thinks she's drunk. She holds her own and claims her grief-filled story.

Eventually, Hannah's prayers are fulfilled; she has a son (and more children); problem solved.

But that's not how it works out for many women. How do we respond to those whose hopes are unfulfilled? Today, I don't often think of the long years of waiting and wondering, crying out and pondering these things in my heart. But then, someone's comment about motherhood or children will touch me, and I'll look around and wonder if I am the only one who has not given birth. And then I realize, no, there are many of us. We just haven't had these conversations yet.

How do we share our experiences of joy?

I have friends who stay away from church on Mother's Day, afraid that clueless pastors will invite all the mothers to stand. I have friends who feel that they cannot attend one more baby shower. Sometimes, we can't tell the story of our miscarriages, losses, or unfulfilled hope—yet. But, as we are able, our courageous storytelling leads to a sense of community. It's essential that we share our grief so that we can experience healing and joy.

It's important to distinguish between healing and cure. It is likely that those of us who are infertile over many years will always be that way. The hope that we cling to as Christians is that babies are not the only way that God blesses women, and that God is still creating through us in many ways. A healing prayer that I treasure is this one:

*Spirit of the Living God,  
present with you now,  
enter you body, mind and spirit  
and heal you of all that harms you.\**



Or, if a healing prayer doesn't seem appropriate, I offer my own words:

*God, help us perceive your creating goodness.*

*Create resiliency in us, and give us more expansive visions of what you are bringing to birth.*

It can be hard to rejoice for another who becomes pregnant when that celebration ignores or emphasizes our own suffering and loss. However difficult, we must rejoice with and for one another. Daily, I teach that life is a skill to my children (and let's be honest, to myself). It's hard work that's worth it. Likewise, we shouldn't exclude people from our lives who do not have children—out of fear of hurting them or because we think they might decline an invitation.

One friend shared this helpful insight: "I have lost many good friends after they had children because they were immersed in the parenting world and didn't include us in it."

My friend and her husband were in a young couples group in church, and one by one, each couple became pregnant, except for them. "No one asked us about it. No one talked about our situation, but we celebrated theirs," she said.

Now the families with children spend weekend afternoons together, set up play dates, and my friend and her husband are not included.

My friend said "We are pleasant to one another, but we don't have what could have been a strong friendship after six years." She said, "I think we all really missed the boat—we missed the chance to be open in our grief and share it, and they missed out in including us in their joys. By not including us, we not only lose our friends, but we also lose the opportunity to know their children."

How does God bless?

My hope is that we can create better rituals in congregations for blessing those who are pregnant and for

honoring parents—rituals that allow the whole community to rejoice with them.

I also hope that we adopt rituals for remembering and honoring the journeys of people who will never celebrate welcoming a child into the world. For some couples this could be a private ritual with just a few trusted friends. Other couples may be ready to share their stories with the congregation. It depends on how vulnerable they feel in their communities of faith and where they are on their journey.

How can we help congregations better understand the gifts all people have to offer? How can we create thanksgivings or blessings for all kinds of families?

Perhaps we might consider developing communal rituals that honor our diversity, and recognize that we are all called, gathered, enlightened, and sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

Hannah's gift

I am awed by the fact that Hannah so quickly releases her child to God's care. It seems as if she barely gets to enjoy him before she lets him go.

Whether or not we have children, letting go is a lifelong practice.

At Good Friday service I noticed, as if for the first time, how even from the cross, Jesus uniquely created family. Jesus gave his mother and the disciple that he loved to one another. He showed them they were family. That's a great gift of the church—we are never abandoned. Additionally, whatever ways we create relationships of love and commitment, a precedent likely exists.

In our suffering, we are not alone. In our joy, we are not alone. We are invited to share and spread it.

God blesses in many ways, and nothing—not even infertility—can separate us from God's intimate and endless love. 🌿

**The Rev. Joy L. McDonald Coltvet** is a pastor in St. Paul, Minn., who has served in parish, campus ministry, and seminary settings over 12 years of ordained ministry in the ELCA.





# HANNAH, A PROMISE KEEPER

by Kay Ward

IN GOOD COMPANY:  
STORIES OF BIBLICAL WOMEN

BIBLE STUDY : SESSION 1

## Theme verse

"For this child I prayed; and the LORD has granted me the petition that I made to him. Therefore I have lent him to the LORD; as long as he lives, he is given to the LORD. She left him there for the LORD."  
(1 Samuel 1:27-28)

## Hymn

He's Got the Whole World in His Hands

## Overview

Hannah, a barren woman, prays to God for a son and makes a vow that if she is given a son, she will return him to God as a nazirite.

## With a Psalm in our Hearts

READ PSALM 139:1-24.

In each of our Bible study sessions, we will begin our time together with a psalm, an ancient song. There are many different kinds of psalms, and these verses of Psalm 139 are a good example of a "well-being" psalm. It is a favorite of mine not only because it is so personal but because it mentions knitting, and there aren't many knitting references in the Bible. As you read verses 1-6, what words or phrases seem most interesting to you?

1. Make a list of all the verbs (the being or doing words).  
What kind of a person (or God) do such verbs describe?

Here, the words are directed to God. The writer or singer speaks to God about who God is and how God operates in the world. The first section speaks of a God

who knows everything. It speaks of God's omniscience.

I first heard about the *omnis* in confirmation class, and it was easy for me as a young girl to relate to a God that was omnipotent (all powerful), omnipresent (everywhere), and omniscient (knowing everything). It was a bit of a relief that at least someone was in charge of the

world. I was young and hadn't begun to ask the hard questions of God and my life.

For more mature people, God's omniscience leads to questions that believing people have struggled with generation after generation. These are not questions that have easy answers, and it is often living in the midst of such doubts and questions that our faith grows.

2. What kinds of questions does the understanding of omniscience bring to mind for you?

Verses 7-12 speak of God's omnipresence. No matter where we go, God is present. Someone has said that when we feel far away from God, we should ask ourselves, "Who moved?" (See "Always With You," p. 6.)

Verses 13-18 speak of our being created by God and the psalmist uses language familiar to women who create and weave and knit and sew. Whether we are giving birth to a child, weaving a rug, knitting a sweater, or sewing a jacket, we can relate to the idea of making something new. We participate in creation—not only in making an object to use and enjoy but making



a new start or a new life. At the end of this chapter we will turn to a parable in which Jesus uses a metaphor of this new creation.

We can feel at one with a God who makes things, including us. This section is so intimate—a God who knows us from the skin out is surely a God that we can trust and to whom we can bring all of our deepest longings.

### The Bible Tells Us So—Extra Credit

If it has been a while since you have read the creation stories, turn to Genesis chapters 1 and 2.

What differences and similarities do you notice in the two creation stories?

You might like to have someone read a portion of *God's Trombones* called "The Creation" by James Weldon Johnson. It can be found at <http://suzyred.com/poemcreation.html>. How does the poem connect with Psalm 139?

If you didn't sing the old spiritual "He's Got the Whole World in his Hands" before you began this chapter, sing it now. It is reminiscent of Psalm 139. (When we sing an old song, we sometimes have to set aside our use of inclusive language for God.) The last verses of Psalm 139 seem to come from a darker place but they also speak of a solid trust and confidence in God.

### A story from the Old Testament: Hannah

READ 1 SAMUEL 1:1—2:21.

At the beginning of the book of 1 Samuel, Hannah is mentioned as the first of Elkanah's wives. By being mentioned first, we could assume that she was the favored wife, but then we learn that Elkanah's second wife, Peninnah, though she is not mentioned first,

is in a superior position. Peninnah has provided her husband with children. Hannah has no children. In a culture where polygamy was accepted, the close association of the two wives was sure to lead to discord when one of the wives was childless, and such was the case with Hannah and Peninnah.

Barrenness was the most bitter misfortune in ancient times, and, for many, that stigma continues even today. There were years in my life when I hated reading those old familiar stories of barren Sarah and barren Hannah and barren Elizabeth. Was it just my imagination or did the Bible have more than its share of barren women stories? I am a barren woman, and when I first knew that to be true, I felt useless and empty. Questions flooded into my mind as I found reasons not to attend worship on Mother's Day and to avoid baby showers and the infant sections in department stores. (Our adoption of four children has more than overcome those feelings.) And as miserable as I was in those early married years, I never believed that my being barren had anything to do with my character or my faith.

Such was not the case for Hannah. In the Old Testament, barrenness was considered to be a curse and it was an affliction that was sent by God. The people in Israel believed that God had given the gift of procreation, as a commandment and a blessing, and it was only natural to assume that God had a hand in withdrawing that gift. (See "Hannah's Hope, Our Hope," p. 26.)

3. Adoption can be such an expensive and difficult process these days and many couples do not feel able to adopt for a variety of reasons. Also, given the fact that many single mothers now keep their children with little stigma, the demand for adoptable babies far outstrips the supply. Do you know couples that still suffer from infertility? How has your congregation responded to them? What might a congregation do to ease some of their suffering? Do you know couples that do not want to have children and hence feel left out of many activities? What might your congregation do to make them feel comfortable and welcome?



#### READ 1 SAMUEL 1:3-6, PILGRIMAGE TO SHILOH.

It was the tradition of Elkanah to make a pilgrimage to the sanctuary at Shiloh each year. Shiloh was an important sacred place and it was the scene of the fall grape harvest festival. Elkanah, a pious man, as the head of his household, packed up the entire household and headed to Shiloh. The highlight of the festival was a sacrificial meal. It was the responsibility of the head of the household to divide up the sacrificial meal for all the members of his family. The women and children would have kept in the background during the sacrifice for the feast as they waited to be served their portions.

Elkanah always gave Hannah a double share of the feast, but she was so distraught that she couldn't enjoy it. In fact, she couldn't eat at all. Though the text says that Elkanah wondered why she couldn't eat, he must have known why. The pilgrimage would have been an especially difficult time for Hannah as she mingled with all the mothers and their babies and suffered the taunts that Peninnah continually threw at Hannah.

#### READ 1 SAMUEL 1:7-11, HANNAH PRAYS TO GOD.

Elkanah continued to take his family to Shiloh each year and Hannah continued to be distraught and not able to eat at the feast. Because Elkanah loved Hannah, on this particular pilgrimage he asked her why she wasn't eating and why his love wasn't enough. He asked, "Isn't my love worth more than 10 sons?" The text doesn't tell us how Hannah answered, but I think the answer would have been "no, it wasn't enough." Not this time. Not ever. Hannah slips away from the feast and goes to the sanctuary, weeping. As she pours out her sadness, she makes a deal with the Lord. She asks God for a son, not just a child, but a son and promises that if she is able to bear a son, she will present him to the Lord as a nazirite.

Making deals is how we function with other people: "If you do this for me, I will do this for you in return." So it is not surprising for us to try making deals

with God. "God, if you will spare my husband, I will never take anything for granted again." (See "Please, God," p. 18.)

4. What kind of deals have you been tempted to make with God in your own life?

#### READ 1 SAMUEL 1:12-20,

##### HANNAH IS ACCUSED OF BEING DRUNK.

Eli, the priest at Shiloh, was sitting in the doorway, apparently unseen by Hannah as she rushed into the sanctuary to weep and pray. And Eli was watching her and noticed that her lips were moving but she wasn't saying anything out loud. Eli assumes that she is drunk, perhaps because there was a lot of partying going on at the feast. It would have been expected that Hannah would have joined the others in their festival drinking.

Eli tells Hannah to "put away her wine" and refrain from making a drunken spectacle of herself. Hannah corrects him, and uses a possible play on words. She has not been drinking but, rather, pouring out her soul. Eli responds pastorally by blessing Hannah, praying that she depart in peace, and entreating God to answer Hannah's prayer. Hannah felt better. She went back to her room, ate and drank with her husband, and in the morning returned to their home. In due time, Hannah bore a son and called him Samuel, meaning "he over whom the name of God has been said."

#### READ 1 SAMUEL 1:21-28,

##### HANNAH TAKES SAMUEL TO SHILOH.

The next year when it was time to go to Shiloh, one could imagine the anticipation that Hannah would have felt to join the others and show off her baby son Samuel. She could finally join in the festivities and words from Peninnah could no longer hurt her. But Hannah did not go. Her reason was sound: Samuel was still nursing so it wouldn't make sense for her to take him to Shiloh. Perhaps Hannah also wanted to



keep Samuel with her as long as possible. She knew what she had promised to do, and she would keep her promise but there was no harm in postponing that decision as long as possible.

Time passes and when Samuel is weaned, she prepares him for the trip to Shiloh. The text says that she brought him to the house of the Lord and the child was young. When Hannah's family had made their sacrifice to the Lord, Hannah reminds Eli that she is the woman who had promised to give her son to the Lord for the rest of his life. And the chapter ends "she left him there for the Lord."

Whew! I cannot imagine myself being able to do that. He was a little boy. And I can see him crying out for his mother as she leaves him. How could she ever turn and leave him there in the sanctuary? (See "Mother as Steward," p. 22.)

5. As a mother or an aunt or a grandma or a friend, what circumstances would enable you to carry out this promise?
6. There is something powerful happening in this story that enables Hannah to rise above her human needs and bring her son to God. Share what you think that might be.

#### READ 1 SAMUEL 2:1–10, HANNAH'S SONG.

At this point in the middle of the story, we read a psalm that has been attributed to Hannah. The psalm itself answers the question we have asked. Hannah is a woman of faith and her song begins as a song of praise. It is utterly personal. She rejoices in her victory and we can only imagine who she is thinking of when she mentions her enemies. Then she begins a long list of things God can do—everything from breaking the bows of the mighty to enabling the barren one who then bears seven children. She also sings that God is in charge of everything (that *omni* again). And the song ends with the assurance that God is good and that God will continue to guard the feet of the faithful. Hannah

has trusted in God and God has heard her prayers.

7. When we hear about the loss of a child, we might be tempted to say, "O, how fortunate for them that they have other children." How might such a statement be heard by a grieving parent?
8. There is a direct connection between Hannah's Prayer and Mary's Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55). See if you can find the similarities.

#### READ 1 SAMUEL 2:11–21, SONS OF ELI.

The details of the behavior of the sons of Eli is curious. First they are declared to be scoundrels, and then we are given the details of what they are doing that is so awful. This is difficult to understand because we don't know all the nuances of sacrificial practice. Suffice it to say that they were not behaving properly. And it was doubly troubling that the misdeeds were done during the high religious sacrificial rite on God's altar.

Unlike many of the stories that we will read, this story of Hannah has a happy ending. Hannah and Elkanah have three more sons and two daughters, but, for Hannah, five other children did not erase the loss of Samuel. Even with three sons and two daughters, Hannah continued to have her firstborn on her mind. We read that each year when she returned to Shiloh, she brought with her a robe that she had sewn for Samuel. I can imagine her dreaming of him as she made each stitch. She was able to see him once a year, and that surely was a blessing. But she also experienced the loss of Samuel's growing into a man. As confident as she was in keeping her promise to God, it seems to me that she always remained a mom.

#### A Story from the New Testament: New Wine in Old Wineskins

##### READ LUKE 5:33–39.

Jesus is trying to convey to his listeners that following him will require a change of heart, a new way of being. And he tells them two short parables. First there is a



parable for those who know about making and storing wine. Then he includes a parable about the proper way to mend and sew, tasks often assigned to the busy hands of women.

I think I have always misunderstood this parable because I was paying attention to the old garment that needed patching. I imagined trying to put a patch on the knees of old blue jeans and the fabric being so thin that it wouldn't hold a stitch.

As I read the parable again, I have had it all wrong. This parable is about the new, good wine and a perfectly good garment. You don't take a lovely blouse and cut a chunk out of the front of it to mend an old nightgown. That wouldn't make sense. He says it wouldn't match in the first place but in the case of the old nightgown, that might not matter so much but what are you going to do with the new blouse with a patch-shaped piece of fabric cut out of the front? This kingdom that Jesus is referring to is his new creation and some old ways of doing things may have to be let go. We must use new wineskins to put our new best religious practices in. You can't live a new creation kind of life with the same old bad habits of the past. It just won't work, says Jesus. (See a different take in "The Value of Old and New," p. 12. What do you think?)

9. What might new wine and new wineskins mean for your own life of faith?
10. Are there habits that get in the way of your becoming a new creature in Christ? In worship? In your prayer life? In how you see others?

#### **A Story from Today: My Sewing Sister from Namibia**

The snow is blowing in horizontal blasts against the window. This old house does not give into the wind easily, but moans and groans in response to the raging blizzard. I sit in my favorite chair, a cup of coffee at my side, all warm and content. In my hand lies a beautiful

jacket, a sewing project for the evening. It is a jacket that I bought in Namibia in southern Africa several weeks ago. It was made by a Namibian woman in a handsome African print fabric, but the sleeves are too long. My project for the night is to shorten the sleeves.

I pierce into the tightly sewn seam, and I am aware that the woman who made this jacket was scrupulously tidy and skillful in her work. I can see where she has carefully reinforced the stitching so there would be no loose ends to unravel. My seam ripper takes each stitch out until I'm left with the raw edge but even here, my sewing sister has carefully made an extra row of stitching.

When I cut the sleeve, I feel a gentle tug at my heart and I am connected with that other place and time as if I had been beamed up in some magical way. I can feel this other woman also cutting this same piece of fabric. She has made the first cut. I make the second. My scissors separate a narrow strip of cloth from the jacket sleeve, and I am back in the heat of a Namibian day. The noonday heat makes her scissors sticky and the fabric sticks to her arm as she leans on the table. Just the binding on the sleeve to finish and she will have another warm, quilted jacket for tourists to buy. Where would such warmth be needed? Very far away, she muses and wipes her sweaty brow. She wonders who will buy this one.

There, I have removed the binding on the first sleeve. I replace it in exactly the same spot only two inches higher. I leave her original stitches because they are so small and perfect. As I try the jacket on once more to check to see if the length is right, I can feel her also trying on the jacket. We both have pulled it around us for comfort. We have both smoothed the seams and straightened the collar. We are sewing sisters.

#### **The Work of our Hands**

I was raised by a mother who believed that handwork cured almost anything. It certainly cured boredom or that malady of addiction to television. So if my sister of

watched television, we were working on something. I still do “handwork.” As I am writing this chapter, I am knitting a little blue-and-white sweater for a baby boy who was born last week to one of our young pastors. As I knit, I pray for the little boy, his family and the congregation who has welcomed him. Each row is a prayer.

#### 11. What objects of love and faith have you offered to those you love?

Several times in this chapter we have spoken of sewing and creating with our hands. Spend a few minutes offering up the kinds of activities that you do with your hands that give God glory.

- 12 Think about Hannah sewing those little garments for her son, Samuel. As the years passed, the sizes of the garments must have grown too. What do you think she was thinking as she stitched?

### Praying Hands

As little girls, we may have been taught to fold our hands as we prayed. As grown up women, that still may feel like the natural thing to do. I would like to offer a new wineskin for the closing prayer. Because what we do with our hands is so important to us, there will be a different hand gesture for each chapter. (See them on p. 36.)

As God knit us in creation, as Hannah and my sewing sister sewed the tiny stitches to bring two pieces of fabric together, I invite you to fold your hands together. Keep your fingers hanging down inside of your hands. It's the “here's the church” posture before the steeple.) As you look at your first knuckles all lined up, you can almost see the knitting stitches that God used. Two pieces of fabric are now one, woven together.

Take a few moments before you begin your prayer time to think about being knit together by God. Offer thanks to God for taking the torn fabric of our lives and putting us back together.

### Let Us Pray

Holy God, you have searched us and you do know us in our inward parts. We thank you for your servant Hannah and for all those people who inspire us. Make of our study time together a blessing that will reach out from this circle of friends into our world so that others may know you. Remind us daily of the gift to us of your son so that we too might know the newness of life that he has promised. We ask these things in the name of your son and our savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

### Hands to Work and Hearts to God

“Hands to work and hearts to God” is a saying from our sisters and brothers the Shakers and it reminds us that we have been given hearts and heads and hands with which to serve. Does it also remind you of the ELCA tagline: God's Work, Our Hands? In the coming month, you might want to try something new as you continue to grow in your faith:

- In your daily devotions, try using the “upside down” praying hands gesture to remind you of what you have learned in this chapter.
- Be mindful of your hands this month—we sometimes take them for granted. Maybe they need to be cared for with a new gentle soap or lotion.
- If you are a crafty sort, think of something that you could make with your hands to give to someone who needs encouragement. Remember writing uses your hands when you write a note or card.
- You might like to try your hand at writing a psalm of your own. Having a journal handy for this Bible study will be a helpful tool. There will always be a writing assignment. 🌿

The Rt. Rev. Dr. Kay Ward is a bishop in the Moravian Unity. In 1998, she was the first woman to be chosen as a bishop in the Moravian church's 250-year history. Ordained in 1979, she has served parishes in Indiana and California. Retired in 2006 as professor and administrator of Moravian Theological Seminary in Bethlehem, Pa., she and her husband live in a log cabin in central Wisconsin.



2013—2014  
BIBLE STUDY REFERENCE

IN GOOD COMPANY:  
STORIES OF BIBLICAL WOMEN

# PRAYER HAND GESTURES

We'll be using various hand gestures when we pray at the end of each session. We've presented all nine of them here. Save this page for future reference.



SESSION 1: HANNAH  
SEPT 2013



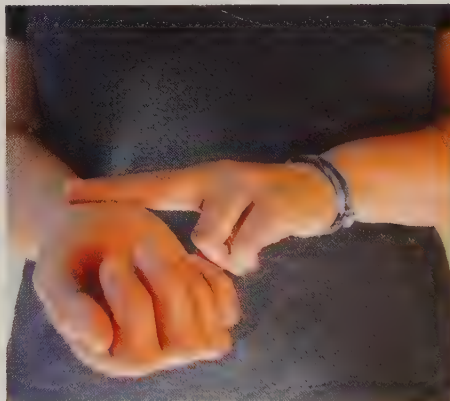
SESSION 2: DEBORAH  
OCT 2013



SESSION 3: ZAREPHATH  
NOV 2013



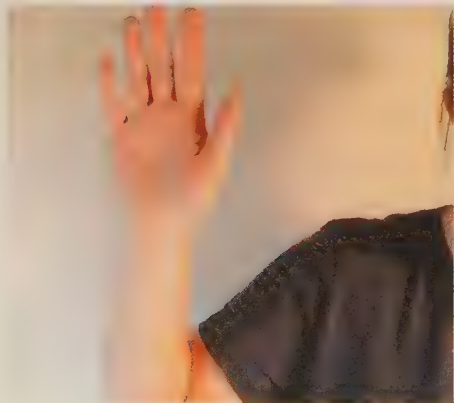
SESSION 4: MIRIAM  
DEC 2013



SESSION 5: ABIGAIL  
JAN/FEB 2014



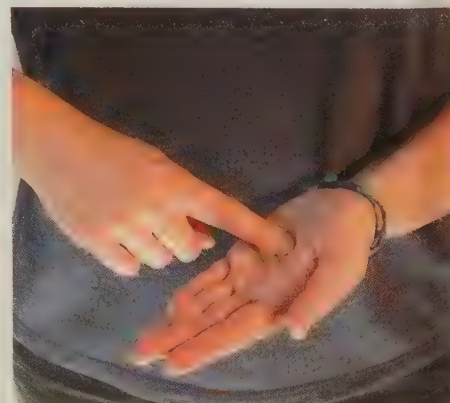
SESSION 6: ENDOR  
JAN/FEB 2014



SESSION 7: MIRIAM  
MARCH 2013



SESSION 8: RIZPAH  
APRIL 2014



SESSION 9: RAHAB  
MAY 2014



LET US PRAY

## Good Company: Eunice Simonson

by Julie K. Ageson

Now in her 80s, she still lights up a room when she enters. Eyes sparkling, curious about everyone she meets, gracious and kind, Eunice Simonson has lived a long and full life. Her story is a compelling mosaic of Midwestern roots and global connections—infused with a deep piety and unwavering sense of God's presence. Eunice Simonson is good company!

I met Eunice (as she likes to be called) for the first time last spring. She and her daughter, Naomi, traveled from their home in Tanzania, East Africa, to Istanbul and then on to Israel. At a hotel on the edge of the Mediterranean, they joined our Middle East study trip, a group of 31 friends and alumni of Concordia College eager for the adventure. And she did indeed light up the room.

Widowed in 2010, Eunice embodies a spirit of joy and gratitude, embracing life as an octogenarian. No stranger to travel and someone who has welcomed adventure all her long life, one of Eunice's hopes was to visit the Holy Land: Palestine, Israel, and Jordan. She wanted to see and touch the places of the Old and New Testament stories.

Eunice's life in Africa as a nurse, missionary, mama to the Maasai people, teacher, artist, actress, and so much more is legendary. She and her husband, David, ministered among the Maasai for more than 50 years. Their love of these people and their sense of call to Tanzania shaped their lives. Eunice's backdoor clinic at their home in Arusha was a daily gathering place for all in need of

medical care. She worked in the hospital and clinics she and David helped build.

In the Middle East, Eunice walked with a cane for balance and relied on her daughter for tending to the details of their schedule. At the Mar Elias schools in Galilee, she presented Archbishop Elias Chacour the gift of an ebony cross symbolizing God's work supported by human hands. She made similar gifts to Bishop Munib Younan in Jerusalem and to Dr. Mitri Raheb at the International Lutheran Center in Bethlehem. Her spirit never flagged—even taking a bone-breaking carriage ride into Petra and a camel excursion in the Jordanian desert.

Eunice Simonson radiates a living faith and trust in God's grace and unrelenting love. She revels in the beauty of her African home and is equally at home in the Upper Midwest. No stranger to hardship and suffering, she's never been exempt from the ordinary and extraordinary challenges of life together. But Eunice is hardly ordinary. Her life on two continents, her work, her family, and the thousands of schools and churches and clinics she helped build across East Africa illustrate a life lived for others.

Keeping good company is a privilege. Good company is life giving. Thanks, dear Eunice, for taking me into your good company! 🌸

Julie Ageson retired last spring from ELCA Resource Center leadership, both for the Eastern North Dakota Synod and as Coordinator of ELCA Resource Centers. She and her spouse now write and travel while living at their family gathering place, Red Wolf in West Glacier, Montana.



# KNITTING

## as a Spiritual Practice



by Kathleen Kastilahn

*In this month's Bible study session, we begin with Psalm 139, which has a reference to God knitting us in the womb: "For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made."*

*Women of the ELCA has two resources on knitting: One looks at knitting as a spiritual practice and the other as a way of studying Scripture. This article is adapted from "Knitting as a Spiritual Practice." You can find these resources (and many more) at [www.womenoftheelca.org](http://www.womenoftheelca.org).*

Have you noticed? Recently, knitting "got religion." The revival of this once grandmotherly craft took off in the late 1990s. Women circle round tables in yarn shops to learn the basics or to unravel the mysteries of intricate patterns. They discovered how wonderfully portable this new-old craft is, toting their knitting bags to meetings and waiting rooms. And, knitting is practical, offering the chance to do something enjoyable and productive during often tedious times. Evidently, football season spiked a big boost in knitting projects, as women plan their strategy for Sunday afternoons, whether or not they watch the game on TV.

It wasn't long before knitting came to the church. Prayer shawls captured the imagination and hearts of many women, following this pattern for knitting and praying in the 2000 book, *Knitting into the Mystery*. Prayer shawl ministries bless both the people who receive the shawls in their times of tribulation or celebration and the knitters who create them. Knitting has emerged as a spiritual practice, one that opens a way to meditation.

### THE KNITTING LIFE

Consider what these seasoned knitters share about their time with needles and wool. You'll glimpse lives that are centered in reality, in the moment, in the now.

In the crazy pace of contemporary society we turn to knitting to slow us down and to relax us. ...The captivating rhythm of knitting gives us a chance to step back and view our lives from a little bit of a distance. ...Knitting can be seen as the very process of slowing down and coming home to ourselves.... (Catherine Hinard, *"Knitting as a Spiritual Practice"*)

When I am making a baby or toddler sweater, I think of the tiny life who will wear the sweater. I wish him or her well. (Patricia Hewitt, *Bella's Woolies*, Washington Island, Wis.)

...[T]hrough knitting you can hear and give attention to what's in your heart and soul—that knitting can be a place of rest and thought and a place for the Divine. (Linda Skolnik, *The Knitting Way*)

In knitting, our focus is on the repeated formation of a stitch. When we use this focus in our knitting it gives us the opportunity to notice what's going on—to be mindful. (Tara Jon Manning, *Mindful Knitting*)

#### LET YOUR FINGERS LEAD YOU

Listening to knitters who tell about what's true for them and what's possible for others in the connection between the craft and spirituality is inspiring. What's needed for understanding, though, is experience.

So here is a project—a simple scarf, which, ironically, might be most difficult for experienced knitters who could be instantly bored. But, even that is part of the experience. The purpose of this project, suggested by Tara Jon Manning, is to bring “deliberate focus” to what you're doing this moment, this stitch and the next.

The project uses just one basic stitch. The yarn introduces the unpredictability. You'll choose one skein of variegated color, so you won't know from row-to-row how the color will flow. (Be sure not to pick up one of the new types that automatically stripes.) And you'll also look for one that has uneven thickness in the yarn, a characteristic of hand-spun wools. That adds to the surprises that come the knitter's way.

I decided to cast myself into this project and now will have a long, long scarf to wrap around my neck when I finish this resource. It will be spring in Chicago, which, most often, is a word that means lingering winter.

The choosing of yarn is delightful and offers you the chance to decide where you'll go during your time on your “retreat.” I headed for real spring—with pale blue, clear yellow and sharp green: sky and lake... sunlight...budding leaves and new grass.

#### START A SCARF

Here are probably the simplest instructions you've ever read:

- 1 Match your yarn weight to needle size. Consider if you like the click of aluminum needles or not. I like the quiet and warmth of wooden needles.
- 2 Decide how wide you want your scarf to be and cast on the required number of stitches, using the yarn label as a guide to needle size.
- 3 Knit every stitch, turn to start next row, knit every stitch (the basic garter stitch). Repeat and repeat until you reach the length you want or run out of yarn—whichever comes first.

This scarf is designed to draw you into the experience of the practice of knitting and of meditation. As you begin to knit, you'll notice how different each of the same knit stitches look because of the irregular texture and unpredictable color pattern that your yarn produces. It's mesmerizing and leads to awareness of the ways our own days change. For me, nearly a row of sun-yellow stitches lead to the fresh green looped above. Then I see blue sky coming for a bit—and I'm lost in this woolen world. It's a place of wonder where I can sit in stillness.

Manning, a Buddhist, explains the parallels between this type of knitting and meditation. “By simply creating a quiet state of being, you can begin to notice—notice your thoughts, notice your feelings, and notice the workings of your mind and experience,” she writes. “Through this process of noticing we can begin to develop a kindness—toward ourselves and our world.”



Few Lutheran Christians use beads in worship or in private prayer and meditation. So knitting needles may be our first experience of the rhythmic movement that leads to quiet, to awareness, to observance.

Linda Skolnik, co-author of *The Knitting Way* and a Jew, is drawn to the wisdom of Thomas Moore, who wrote in *Care of the Soul*: “Observance is a word from ritual and religion. It means to watch out for, but also

flock—the whole process of lambing, shearing, spinning,” says Patricia Hewitt, owner of Bella’s Woolies (Washington Island, Wis.). And she thinks, too, of those who have come before: “...about all the women through the centuries who have worked with wool to make clothing for their families. Most had very difficult lives and for them, knitting was probably another task to finish before the end of the day.” This mindfulness

**Psalm 46:10** — “Be still, and know that I am God!”

**Psalm 139:13** — “For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.”

**John 10:14** — “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me...”

to keep and honor, as in the observance of a holiday. The *serv* in *observance* originally referred to tending sheep. Observing the soul, we keep an eye on its sheep, on whatever is wandering and grazing—the latest addiction, a striking dream, or a troubling mood.... Observance of the soul can be deceptively simple. You take back what has been disowned.” Skolnik believes that sitting with needles and yarn, knitting row-after-row, day-in and day-out is a way to make observance part of our spiritual lives.

#### THINGS SEEN AND UNSEEN

Call it meditating or observing or simply knitting alone, the experience of a daily meeting with yarn and needles can, indeed, ready us for glimpses of the Divine. Begin with Scripture.

**REFLECT** on one of the Scripture passages in the box above, or on one of the readings from last Sunday’s or the coming Sunday’s lectionary. Find the assigned texts for Sundays at [elca.org/lectionary](http://elca.org/lectionary). Find a Daily Lectionary at the back of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (pp. 1121–1153).

**PONDER** those who made your experience possible. “I like to think about the wool, the way it feels, the sheep who grew it, the shepherds who tended the

leads her to gratefulness and to compassion.

**PLAY** music from classical or sacred traditions. “[Music] brings about another road of awareness and can smooth out your knitting path, two roads that run parallel and in harmony with each other,” advises Janice MacDaniels, the other co-author of *The Knitting Way*.

**REPEAT** a mantra as you create the stitches. Choose a word that fits the rhythm of your knitting. Or adapt the ancient Jesus prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

Experiencing your body and mind working together in these ways, you may find yourself in a place where you can listen for God and may hear God.

It just may be that after your scarf is finished, you’ll want to continue this solitary knitting meditation as a spiritual practice. I do. There are organizations who will gladly distribute your scarves. But I also want to knit other things, in other ways, at other times and with other people.

All that’s needed are several knitting bags, each holding yarn and needles—and a pattern and promise. 🌿

**Kathleen Kastilahn** is a member of the Knit Together ministry at St. Paul Lutheran (Evanston, Ill.). As an 8-year-old, she was taught to knit by her Aunt Marge.





## RACE NOTES

# Let's Change t Up

by Linda Post Bushkofsky



## Summertime can seem

so free. Days are filled with spontaneous ideas and activities. Let's have a picnic in the park. Anybody want an ice cream cone? I'm going for a bike ride, want to join me? Anything can inspire us with new plans.

Whether or not you have someone in school, come September, the days seem more structured, more organized. Programming starts back up in your congregation and with your women's ministries. Vacations have already been taken, so monthly routines like book clubs and quilting efforts can start up again with almost everyone present.

And with routines, drudgery can set it. A bit like the classic movie "If It's Tuesday, This Must Be Belgium," we can end up with a sock drive in September because "we always do a sock drive in September" or a retreat in February because that's the norm. With less than inspired programming, zeal can lag and before long, attendance drops.

Is it possible to capture some of summer's spontaneity with your women's ministry programming this fall? Yes, it is! Here are some ideas you can try.

If planning is usually completed by a small group, open it up to everyone. Create a welcoming environment for the planning session, open with a creativity exercise, offer some healthy snacks, and the brainstorming will flow. Remember, no idea is a bad one. (But you don't have to use them all!)

Do you always schedule a potluck dinner? Try a potluck breakfast instead.

Do you usually have your meetings at the church? Try meeting in public spaces, like restaurants or the library or a park or the local coffee shop. Imagine the public witness you will offer.

Are you fond of progressive dinners? Try a regressive dinner where you start with dessert and end with salad.

Invite the tweens and teens of your congregation to plan an event for you.

Call up a neighboring congregation, Lutheran or other, and plan a joint event. Perhaps you can be of service to your shared community or maybe you'll have a chance to swap programming ideas.

Are you always involved in active service? Why not try something more contemplative? Plan a prayer vigil. Walk a labyrinth. Hold a Taize service.

Look at that. I came up with eight possibilities right off the top of my head. You can do the same. So keep solid and edifying programming. But don't get bogged down in "shoulds" when the Holy Spirit is calling you to much more.

Earlier this year, all the synodical presidents and members of the church-wide executive board read the book *Switch* by Chip Heath and Dan Heath. One of my favorite quotes from the book has a simple message: "For anything to change, someone has to start acting differently."

Well, sisters, I'm thinking that someone is you. Post your great ideas on our Facebook page at [www.facebook.com/WomenoftheELCA](http://www.facebook.com/WomenoftheELCA). 🌸

Linda Post Bushkofsky is executive director of Women of the ELCA.





AMEN!

## Hannah, Servant of God

by Catherine Malotky

### God, I am a woman

listening to Hannah's story. She lived long ago and I have questions. The story begins with a careful listing of her husband's genealogy. Four fathers before him are named, each having begat the next generation. Ephraimites, who became the bedrock of the Northern Kingdom, who worshipped at Bethel and Shiloh and Shechem. Ephraim, which means "to be fruitful."

But Hannah was barren. Elkanah's favorite wife, but barren. His other wife, described as her rival, provoked her, "... because the LORD had closed her womb" (1 Samuel 1:6). What kind of life was this, God? Her job was to produce heirs. Would not her husband, who could afford two wives, hope for children from both? The theological perspective of her day assumed she had done something to deserve this punishment.

Hannah grieved. She suffered because of this understanding. No doubt she combed through her life, looking for the crime, the fault, the flaw that now burdened her so. No doubt her neighbors did as well. We know her rival wife did.

We are so capable of distorting your presence in our lives, God. Our vision of your love is limited. In spite of the wonders science has taught us, we can still get lost in short-sightedness. For example, long ago, who knew that mental illness was biological? Instead it was considered demon possession or lack of self-control. How are we still burdened by our prejudices about this? How do we create a world that values all whom

you love, even those who are not convenient or easy?

Eli, high priest, came to conclusions about Hannah based on his prejudices. He did not see someone who was expressing in her prayer the distress and pain she felt. He assumed instead that she was drunk and wheedled her. How often have we done similar things, in our gossip or judgments of others?

And when we've been the ones misjudged? Might Hannah be our example sure of God's love for her? Sure of God's providence for her? Can we respond as graciously as she did, to clarify our reality without judging in return, without resorting to martyred bitterness?

In so doing, Hannah changed Eli. She opened him to her plight, and he blessed her. Their world became a more gracious place because of her courage and faith.

Hannah had her son. She consecrated him to God, consciously naming his future as God's even before he was born. Hannah too, was in God's hands, and though no one had spoken words of consecration over her, she was no less a servant in God's house, especially that day.

Gracious God, faithful lover of your children, fill us with confidence in your love for us. Help us see that each of your children is a miraculous combination of wonder and challenge. Ground us in your love, so we might live fully and faithfully. In Jesus' name, Amen. 🌸

**The Rev. Catherine Malotky**, an ELCA pastor, serves at Luther Seminary as a philanthropy adviser. She has served as a parish pastor, editor, teacher, and retreat leader.



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